

The BookBrunch Interview: Ed Marino, Executive Chairman, codeMantra

JASMIN KIRKBRIDE • 08 December 2016



There have been a lot of claims over the past year that digital sales are down and print is on the rise, but according to Ed Marino, Chief Executive and part-owner of service provider codeMantra, publishing's phase of uncertainty is far from over. In our trans-Atlantic chat, we discuss the definition of true collaboration, the role of service providers in the industry, and our very technological future.

Marino came on board with codeMantra in February 2014, after he and a group of colleagues acquired the business. In his classic US accent, Marino describes it as "a technology-enabled services company" that offers content production and software platform services to major publishers, primarily in the STM and Academic space.

Their services range from manuscript composition to printing and digital formatting, alongside a publishers' services platform that includes workflow management, storing and distribution of content. What's more, the platform is stable and had already been in the market for ten years before Marino and he colleagues came on board.

Every industry needs its service providers but things are moving particularly fast for publishing right now, making the need even greater. "It's not possible for publishers to keep up with technology because their job is to acquire and market content," says Marino. "A lot of the things that

are done back-office should be done by service providers because it's a much more efficient model for the publisher."

As such, there is an increasing dependency on service providers across the industry and many operations that used to be performed in-house are now done externally. However, says Marino, with the transition towards digital, a lot of service providers have also had to fill in gaps to provide technology services that publishers simply didn't need in the past.

"Digital has changed everything!" Marino says. "As the industry has evolved and become even more dependent on digital, we've seen an explosion in the complexity of content, not only in its preparation but in its delivery as well. For example, the range of metadata that's required to manage even a small number of assets is enormous. It can no longer be done manually, you need technology to really help you with this."

How soon is now

Using automation, codeMantra has managed to significantly speed up the content creation process, in line with the expectations for instant delivery that digital has brought about. "There is no long cycle to producing and delivering content any more," Marino says, "everything is on demand."

Though some have expressed fears that these new digital requirements are squeezing traditional publishers out of the game, Marino remains adamant this is not the case. "Service providers just allow publishers to think about their businesses differently," he says. "What we're talking about is not unprecedented and it's not a negative for the publisher, it can be a positive! Just like any other business, publishers need to think about how best to distribute their resources and one of the ways to do that is to find the most capable service providers you can, so you can deploy a model that allows you to be as efficient and concentrated on your core competencies as possible."

Others have cited concerns that contracting in service providers instead of keeping skills in-house could contribute to the industry's 'skill drain'. Marino disagrees with this and indeed he hopes that these skills are not transferring from publishers over to service providers. "That would just be reshuffling the deckchairs on the Titanic. It doesn't really change anything." What service providers should offer are new skills the industry desperately needs.

Think global, go global

CodeMantra prides itself on being a very international business, with large operations in India, the US and the UK. That global reach is increasingly important: according to Marino, it's no longer a case of if you need to reach everyone, it's when and how. "It's now a global market, there's no question about it, so a global delivery and services model is what you need to

compete." Businesses should set themselves up internationally and globally from the start, he asserts.

"Technology is part of what makes the world smaller. You have to be independent of where the publisher, customer, or even author are located," he continues, saying that the right communications model can broaden you reach enormously. Though codeMantra has a large permanent staff in Asia, North American and Europe, it also brings in freelancers around the world for specialised participation. This potential for localised communication is just as key to a successful business.

It isn't just communication with customers that's key, but also between businesses. Marino says the classic vendor-client relationship, where a company hired a services provider to do specific jobs then broke ties, needs to be replaced with the more collaborative strategic alliance.

"Client-vendor relationships work in areas where you don't have some major challenge which you have to overcome," he said, "but today those problems and challenges do exist in the publishing world." He cites Lightning Source as an example of a product that "was never going to work" with just one company trying to create it."

"Alliances work in areas where you need to make a quantum leap of some type," he says. "It's a passion for us. We do believe that in many cases publishers are far better off if they become closer to their service providers through an alliance rather than a classic vendor-client relationship."

Though communication is key to these relationships, the right kind of engagement is just as important. Businesses in alliance need to be talking to each other productively at every level, from the ground to the executives. "What that means from a service provider's standpoint is that you can't have hundreds and thousands of relationships out there," says Marino. "You have to choose the customers that are best for your model and that allows you to participate with that client and engage with them meaningfully."

These more equal strategic alliances allow codeMantra to step in and improve workflow efficiency, though only when the publisher is open-minded enough to the change. "Sometimes the publishers actually can't believe it!" Marino says, and you can hear his grin. "Publishers have standardised certain workflows, business process and schedules. When we can come in and show them how an accelerated schedule can be applied to those processes, not on a one-off basis, but all the time, their first reaction is always, 'Yeah, but that's not the way we do it.' But, a little at a time, we help show them how performance can be improved if you allow the technology to help you. That's our biggest satisfaction."

Much more digital to come

However, though codeMantra can turn work around in a very short period of time at high quality, like many technology service providers, it has a heavy reliance on a labour model. "Breaking away from that labour model is a challenge for content providers," says Marino.

"The other challenge is what I would call 'institutional inertia'," he continues. Many service providers get to a certain size and standardise their procedures, which causes a problem when something new comes along. "Just like the publishers, service providers have to start thinking a little bit outside the box. For our future at codeMantra, we're going to continue investing in technology and improving business processes, because that the life-blood of any organisation."

What's more, Marino doesn't see an end to the uncertainty the industry has experienced over the past few years, and doesn't see digital going away or plateauing for good any time soon. "Look, 100 years from now, do you think for one minute that people are going to be reading the majority of their content in print? I doubt it. So the question is: when does that avalanche really begin? It's only a matter of time.

"Don't stick your head in the sand, recognise that there's going to be uncertainty for the next couple of years and try to model your business in such a way that you are able to deal with that uncertainty. Have a good strategy, but make sure that strategy allows you to flex. Because you're going to need to."

While this might make some nervous, to Marino the challenge couldn't be more inspiring. "I think publishing is an exciting industry and has a very, very sound future ahead of it. I hope over the course of the next couple of years, publishers and service providers all continue to cherish and embrace that vision and really feel good about the business that we're in. We provide the world a great service. Despite the fact that content volume is growing at such an exponential rate around the world, it's not always as high a value content as the publishing world produces. We need to help continue to grow that value."